



Giving Little

By TSgt Nik Waller
31 FW/HO
Aviano AB, It

When you think of history and the 31st Fighter Wing, certain images may spring to mind: F-16s soaring over Italian mountains; F-4s zooming over southern Florida; or F-100s flying into combat over Vietnam. But did you ever think of aerial refueling? Although the 31st has always been a fighter wing, it figures prominently in the history of aerial refueling.

Our story begins with Colonel David C. Schilling, a WWII fighter ace with 22.5 kills who gave little fighters long legs. In 1948, Schilling led 16 F-80's on a ten-day trip from Michigan to the United Kingdom. The operation, called FOX ABLE ONE (Fighters Atlantic, Number 1), entailed five refueling stops. In 1950, Schilling completed the first non-stop transatlantic flight in a jet aircraft when he flew his F-84E from the United Kingdom to Maine. His fighter was among the first U.S. fighters to benefit from single point refueling, a probe extending from the left wing. Aerial refueling provided by hose-equipped British and American tankers trimmed the transatlantic trip from ten days to ten hours.

On May 1, 1951, Colonel Schilling took command

of the 31st Fighter Escort Wing. Just over a year later, on Independence Day, 1952, 62 F-84G Thunderjets roared off the runway at Turner AFB, Georgia, bound for Travis AFB, California. Three squadrons of the 31st Fighter Escort Wing had begun their long journey to the Far East. In the process, the wing would establish new standards in global reach. Operation FOX PETER ONE (Fighters Pacific, Number 1) was underway.

Over Wink, Texas, the fighters refueled from KB-29P tankers. Unlike the probe-equipped E-model, the F-84G was equipped to refuel from a flying boom. This refueling served as practice for the next, very important leg of the trip. On 6 July, the first section of aircraft departed California for Hawaii; on 7 and 8 July, the other two sections followed. With no divert options available, the Travis-to-Hickam leg of the operation stood as the longest over-water flight in the world. Refueling from tankers over the Pacific, all of the wing's aircraft arrived safely in Hawaii, marking the world's longest over-water flight by jet fighter aircraft.

The journey to Japan continued on July 10, with the aircraft island-hopping for the next six days: Hawaii, Midway, Wake Island, Eniwetok, Kwajalein, Guam, and Iwo Jima. On 16 July, the wing's aircraft landed at Yokota Air Base, Japan, completing the first transpacific movement of an entire fighter wing with the aid of aerial refueling.

To understand the impact of FOX PETER



Courtesy photo

JUL 52 The Fighters Long Legs

ONE, we must remember that before the advent of aerial refueling, the pilots would have flown the jets to the West Coast. Once there, the jets would have been sealed (to limit salt corrosion) and deck-loaded aboard an aircraft carrier, ferried across the Pacific, then unloaded and prepared for flight in Japan. Instead, the 31st used aerial refueling to cross the Pacific Ocean in just over a week and a half. For its feat, the 31st received the first-ever Air Force Outstanding Unit Award.

Upon arrival in Japan, the wing assumed responsibility for the air defense of the Japanese Islands, remaining in Japan until mid-October 1952. The wing also wrapped up Project HIGH TIDE. This project, started by another wing, tested the effectiveness of refueling fighters using probe-equipped wingtip tanks. On 16 October, the 27th Fighter Escort Wing arrived in Japan to relieve the 31st. The 27th's FOX PETER TWO voyage utilized a similar route and procedures pioneered by the 31st Fighter Escort Wing.

The 31st, now a "Strategic Fighter Wing," broke new ground again in August 1953. Along with the 508th



Courtesy photo

Strategic Fighter Wing, also based at Turner, the 31st engaged in a force projection exercise called Operation LONGSTRIDE. On August 20, eight Thunderjets from the 31st flew non-stop from Georgia to Nouasseur, French Morocco. KC-97's refueled the aircraft three times: west of Bermuda; between Bermuda and the Azores; and once more over the Azores. On the same day, the 508th sent 20 F-84G's from Turner to RAF Lakenheath. The 508th also refueled three times: over Boston; near Labrador; and finally near Iceland. The 508th completed their trip in just over eleven hours, the 31st in a little more than ten. For his leading role in the mission, Colonel Schilling received the Mackay Trophy for 1953.

Today, aerial refueling affords America's air forces unrivaled reach. The next time you pull up behind a tanker, remember the pioneers of long-range fighter operations—the 31st Fighter Wing.



Courtesy photo